

April 01, 2005- Values, Teamwork Lead to West Virginia Winning Spirit

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Among the things that I appreciate most about growing up in my home state of West Virginia is that it provided for me a tried and true appreciation of what is most important in life. West Virginia is a place where simple values, some might call them old-fashioned, are still taught and lived. As a child I was taught that if you are guided by them, you will achieve happiness and success in life. As an adult, I found those lessons to be true.

I have thought a lot about those early lessons in recent weeks as I watched the West Virginia University basketball team charge through some pretty amazing games into the "Elite Eight" of the NCAA tournament.

The news stories about the team were filled with scenes that could come right out of a Hollywood movie - but those images are as West Virginian as can be.

They include tales about a hard-working coach, who fought his way up through the ranks of college basketball. He's a guy who puts family first. He credits his parents for teaching him the value of hard work and the spirit of competitiveness, and his uncle for inspiring him to devise an innovative style of play that other coaches thought of as nutty. Who could argue that a playbook filled with pages labeled "Peek-a-boo," and "Donuts and Banana Cuts," isn't a little strange? But though he may hail from a small farm in New York, Coach John Beilein seems the kind of guy who would fit right in a small mining town in southern West Virginia.

I've seen the clips about native West Virginian Kevin Pittsnogle, the 6'11" center on this tournament team, who perfected his shooting skills playing H-O-R-S-E against his sister at a hoop in their Martinsburg trailer park. Sportscasters have had as much fun saying his name as they've had watching his three-point swishes. But while Pittsnogle clearly is talented, he admits that it was thoughts of his wife - not the glory of victory - that helped him to sink his free-throws in a recent, high-stakes, tournament game.

The team roster is a list of names virtually unknown outside our state - at least until the team's climb in the Big East and NCAA tournaments. In the words of The New York Times, it's a team that "still doesn't have any legitimate stars." But I tend to think that may be one of its greatest strengths. It is a team that made its way by sharing the ball, the hard work, the dreams, the spotlight, the victories, and the disappointments. In my view, it is a team filled with nothing but stars.

Coach Beilein and each of his assistant coaches along with every member, every part of the team - Patrick Beilein, Luke Bonner, Brad Byerson, J.D. Collins, D'or Fischer, Mike Gansey, Johannes Herber, Darris Nichols, Kevin Pittsnogle, Duriel Price, Tyrone Sally, and Frank Young - contributed to making the whole sounder and stronger. It's an example more of us would do well to follow.

This great display of teamwork was also seen in our high school basketball teams, who made it clear that the West Virginia winning spirit is in good hands. I am proud of all our teams, and want to give special recognition to the coaches and players of our high school basketball teams. And what a joy it was for me to see the AAA and AA boys' championship games packed full of teams from the 3rd Congressional District. Congratulations to Huntington High School and Logan High School for winning the state championship and to Woodrow Wilson High School and Westside High School for their championship game finishes.

As a West Virginian, I am proud of these teams, proud of the way they played, the heart they showed, and the victories they racked up. And, in the case of WVU, dribbling, dunking, and drilling aside, I still think it is their fundamental values that set this team apart and make all of West Virginia proud to call them ours. They have reason to have their heads in the clouds, but what impresses us most is the way they keep their feet on the ground.